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Owls of the United States: A List of all Species

January 21, 2020 · Joe Lowe

Nineteen owl species are found in the United States. Ranging from the diminutive Elf Owl — the smallest owl on the continent — to the massive Great Gray Owl, these charismatic birds come in many shapes and sizes.

While owls' extraordinary hunting skills, nocturnal habits, and haunting calls are the stuff of legend, the dangers they face are often overlooked. Threats like habitat loss (https://abcbirds.org/threat/habitat/), pesticides (https://abcbirds.org/threat/pesticides/), and vehicle collisions have already sent a third of all owl species in the United States into decline.

The Northern Spotted Owl (a subspecies of the Spotted Owl) has been protected by the Endangered Species Act (https://www.fws.gov/endangered/laws-policies/) since 1990, and six additional owl species have been placed on Partners in Flight (https://partnersinflight.org/)'s Yellow Watch List, indicating the need for conservation action.

American Bird Conservancy and other organizations are taking a multipronged approach to helping owls by improving key habitat, banning dangerous pesticides (https://abcbirds.org/program/pesticides/), and pushing for improved protections (https://abcbirds.org/action/petition-northern-spotted-owl).

Our List

While some owls depend on specific conditions for survival, others, like the Barn Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/barn-owl/), are remarkably adaptive and are found throughout much of the world. For the purposes of this U.S.-based list, we've used PIF population and conservation data (https://partnersinflight.org/what-we-do/

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science/databases/) exclusive to the United States and Canada, which do not reflect global numbers. Our alphabetical list includes all owl species that live in or visit the continental United States, regardless of breeding location. Finally, owls are reclusive birds, which increases the difficulty of assessing population changes. In cases where this information is lacking, we have not provided population trends.

Barn Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/barn-owl/)

(https://abcbirds.org/bird/barn-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 120,000
Population Trend: Increasing
Habitat: Grasslands, deserts, and agricultural fields
Threats: Habitat loss, vehicle collisions
Note: Besides excellent vision, Barn Owls are extraordinarily sensitive to sound; their ability to locate prey by sound alone is the best of any animal ever tested.

Barred Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 3,200,000
Population Trend: Increasing
Habitat: Mixed, mature forests
Threats: Deforestation
Note: Barred Owls expanded their range dramatically in the 20th century to include western forests, where they now compete with Spotted Owls.

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Boreal Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 1,700,000
Population Trend: Unknown
Habitat: Boreal forests
Threats: Deforestation
Note: While it's not uncommon for female owls to be larger than males, the difference is most pronounced in Boreal Owls; female Boreal Owls occasionally weigh twice as much as males.

Burrowing Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/burrowing-owl/) (https://abcbirds.org/bird/burrowing-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 1,100,000
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Grasslands
Threats: Habitat loss, pesticides, vehicle collisions, introduced predators
Note: Burrowing Owls live underground and hunt on the ground during the day.

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Eastern Screech-Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/eastern-screech-owl/) (https://abcbirds.org/bird/eastern-screech-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 680,000
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Eastern forests
Threats: Deforestation
Note: Eastern Screech-Owls are typically monogamous, breeding together for life.

Elf Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/elf-owl/) (https://abcbirds.org/bird/elf-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 40,000
Population Trend: Unknown
Habitat: Desert scrub
Threats: Habitat loss
Note: The Elf Owl is one of the world's smallest owls, typically weighing less than 45 grams. Its range extends from Mexico into areas of the southwestern U.S.

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Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: <1,000
Population Trend: Unknown
Habitat: Tropical dry forests
Threats: Habitat loss, land conversion, and urbanization
Note: The Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl is one of the most widespread birds of the Neotropical lowlands; its range includes the southern tip of Texas and the south-central edge of Arizona.

Flammulated Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/flammulated-owl/) (https://abcbirds.org/bird/flammulated-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 11,000
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Western forests
Threats: Habitat loss, possibly pesticides
Conservation Status: PIF Yellow Watch List "R" (https://partnersinflight.org/watch-list-categories/)
Note: Unlike many other owls, Flammulated Owls subsist almost exclusively on a diet of insects.

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Great Gray Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 95,000
Population Trend: Unknown
Habitat: Boreal forests
Threats: Deforestation
Note: With a wingspan stretching up to five feet, the Great Gray Owl is one of the largest owls found in the United States.

Great Horned Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/great-horned-owl/) (https://abcbirds.org/bird/great-horned-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 3,900,000
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Wide variety of habitat, including forests and fields
Threats: Pesticide poisonings, occasional illegal hunting
Note: Great Horned Owls hunt Ospreys, Peregrine Falcons, and other types of owls, along with many other animals.

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Long-eared Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 140,000
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Wide range of forests
Threats: Deforestation
Conservation Status: PIF Yellow Watch List "D" (https://partnersinflight.org/watch-list-categories/); Long-eared Owl populations have declined 91% since 1970.
Note: Like other types of owls, the Long-eared Owl's flight feathers have fringed edges that muffle the sound of its flight.

Northern Hawk Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 100,000
Population Trend: Unknown
Habitat: Boreal forests
Threats: Deforestation
Note: Northern Hawk Owls can spot prey at distances up to half a mile away.

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Northern Pygmy-Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 100,000
Population Trend: Stable
Habitat: Western forests
Threats: Habitat loss, removal of nesting trees
Note: Although Northern Pygmy-Owls are similar in size to House Sparrows, they have been known to prey on chickens.

Northern Saw-whet Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/northern-saw-whet-owl/) (https://abcbirds.org/bird/northern-saw-whet-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 2,000,000
Population Trend: Increasing
Habitat: Wide range of forests
Threats: Deforestation
Note: The Northern Saw-whet Owl's name was inspired by the similarity between one of its calls and the sound of a saw being sharpened.

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Short-eared Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/short-eared-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 660,000
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Open areas, including marshes and grasslands
Threats: Habitat loss, pesticide poisoning
Conservation Status: Common Bird in Steep Decline (https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/state-of-the-birds-2014-common-birds-in-steep-decline-list/); Short-eared Owl populations have declined 65% since 1970.
Note: The Short-eared Owl is one the types of owls most seen during daylight hours; it's also one of the most widely distributed owls in the world.

Snowy Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/snowy-owl/)

(https://abcbirds.org/bird/snowy-owl/)

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: <30,000
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Arctic Tundra
Threats: Illegal hunting, vehicle collisions, possibly climate change
Conservation Status: Yellow Watch List "D" (https://partnersinflight.org/watch-list-categories/); Snowy Owl populations have declined 64% since 1970.
Note: Snowy Owls typically winter in southern Canada and the northern United States, but during irruptive years they sometimes stray as far south as Florida.

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Spotted Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: <15,000
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Western forests
Threats: Habitat loss and fragmentation
Conservation Status: PIF Yellow Watch List "D" (https://partnersinflight.org/watch-list-categories/)
Note: Despite decades of federal protection, populations of the Northern Spotted Owl (https://abcbirds.org/bird/northern-spotted-owl/), a subspecies of the Spotted Owl, continue to decline.

Western Screech-Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: 220,000
Population Trend: Unknown
Habitat: Western forests
Threats: Forest loss, particularly along waterways
Note: Western Screech-Owls are ambitious hunters, occasionally feeding on prey larger than themselves.

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Whiskered Screech-Owl

U.S./Canada Population Estimate: <500
Population Trend: Declining
Habitat: Mexican Pine-Oak Forests
Threats: Habitat loss and degradation
Conservation Status: PIF Yellow Watch List "D" (https://partnersinflight.org/watch-list-categories/)
Note: Although Whiskered Screech-Owls are found in southern Arizona and New Mexico, most of their range is in Mexico and Central America.

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